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SECURITY COUNCIL
Fifty-first year

Letter dated 5 February 1996 from the Permanent Representative of Turkey to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit herewith a letter dated 2 January 1996 addressed to you by His Excellency Mr. Osman Ertuğ, Representative of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (see annex).

I should be grateful if the text of the present letter and its annex would be circulated as a document of the fiftieth session of the General Assembly, under agenda item 55, and of the Security Council.

(Signed) Hüseyin E. ÇELEM
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

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ANNEX

Letter dated 2 January 1996 from Mr. Osman Ertuğ
to the Secretary-General

It has recently come to my attention that the founder of the "Byzantine Academy" in southern Cyprus has sent a letter to Your Excellency in connection with the religious heritage in northern Cyprus. Since the said letter, as reported in the Greek Cypriot press, contains a barrage of unfounded allegations against the Turkish Cypriot side and Turkey, I have the honour to send this communication to Your Excellency in order to put on record the facts pertaining to this matter.

At the outset, I wish to refer to my previous letter dated 28 November 1995 addressed to you on this subject which was circulated as document A/50/800-S/1995/1007. At the risk of repetition, I would like to reiterate some of the salient points in that communication, before elaborating on some of the other aspects of the Greek Cypriot letter.

Allegations on "systematic destruction" of cultural property in the north are not new and have been conclusively refuted not only by the Turkish Cypriot side, but also by independent sources, including a prominent United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) expert and the relevant committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

It should be recalled that, in a letter he wrote to the London Times, the respected UNESCO expert, Mr. Jacques Dallibard, who had visited Cyprus twice in 1975, observed that "there was no systematic and organized looting of the cultural heritage of Cyprus. And on the whole, considering that a war took place, the losses are small".

On the other hand, Mr. Ymenus van der Werff, General Rapporteur of the Subcommittee on the Architectural and Artistic Heritage of the Committee on Culture and Education of the Council of Europe, who had come to the island with a delegation of experts to study the situation regarding cultural property in both parts of the island, reported the following on this subject in paragraph 5.3 of his report, which was published as a document of the Council of Europe on 2 July 1989 under the symbol AS/CULT/AA(41)1: "We saw no churches destroyed though St. George in Limnia (in the north) was listed as such."

Contrary to what is claimed, it is the Greek Cypriot side that has always tried, and continues to try, to eradicate all traces of the Turkish-Muslim heritage of Cyprus, particularly during the years between 1963-1974, when they attempted to "cleanse" the island of its ethnic Turkish population through massacre, expulsion and various methods of intimidation. During that tragic period, mosques, shrines and other places of Muslim worship in 103 villages across the island had been destroyed, including the historic Grand Mosque in the southern town of Paphos. The following quotation on this subject taken from the aforementioned Council of Europe report is sad, yet revealing:

"5.3 We noted with regret the complete destruction of the main mosque in Paphos. The whole area has since been flattened to give way for a widened road junction and a car park. There is no memorial to the existence of the mosque. Below the road a Turkish bath complex remains hidden in rubble and vegetation awaiting restoration. The Turkish Cypriot cemetery by the nearby St. Sophia Mouttalos mosque is dilapidated."

Today, the Greek Cypriot side continues to show utter contempt for what is left of the Turkish-Islamic heritage in southern Cyprus. For instance, the historic Bayraktar Mosque on the ancient walls of Nicosia, which is located in the Greek sector of the city, and which had been repeatedly attacked and bombed before 1974 has again been the target of several bombing and arson attacks. The reason is that the mosque stands as a symbol of the centuries-old Turkish-Islamic heritage of the island, and a powerful reminder that Cyprus is not a Greek island.

Regarding the allegations of desecration made in the said letter over the conversion of a number of churches into mosques or museums, it should be emphasized that conservation of historic buildings through use is not only permissible but also recommended under relevant international instruments. For instance, the Amsterdam Declaration, which was issued by the Congress on the European Architectural Heritage in October 1975, states the following:

"It has been shown that historic buildings can be given new functions related to the needs of contemporary life. [p. 7, para. 3]

"... Local authorities should ... afford functions to buildings which, whilst respecting their character, correspond to the needs of contemporary life and thus ensure their survival. [p. 9, paras. 3 and 5]

"A policy of conservation also means the integration of the architectural heritage into social life." [p. 10, para. 5]

The same objectives are expressed in the Charter of Venice, which was drawn up in May 1964 by the International Congress of Architects and Technicians on Historical Monuments. According to article 5 of this Charter, "the conservation of historical buildings can be achieved through use for any useful communal purpose. This is a desirable way of use, however the original plan and ornaments of the buildings should be respected and should not be altered".

In line with the above, the aforementioned Council of Europe report states the following in paragraph 5.3:

"In several cases the churches are used; whether as mosques or for other purposes ..."

"Although the point is controversial, we find it difficult to criticize such reuse. As the Turkish Cypriots point out, it has been general Council of Europe policy for some time to urge reuse of redundant religious buildings ..."

Noteworthy among the churches and religious buildings currently being used as icon museums in northern Cyprus are the Church of Archangel Michael in Girne, the Monastery of St. Barnabas in Gazimağusa, the Church of St. Mamas in Güzelyurt, the Church of the Virgin Mary in Karaman and the Church of Bellapais in Beylerbeyi.

It will be seen from the foregoing that the Greek Cypriot side's complaints in this regard have no basis and are utterly unjustified. Since it is the Greek Cypriot side which has systematically attacked, destroyed or treated with utter disrespect cultural and religious monuments, places of worship and other elements of culture belonging to the Turkish-Muslim heritage of the island, the Greek Cypriot charges on this issue appear as an attempt to shift the blame for the other side's own misdeeds on the Turkish Cypriot side.

I am confident that, in view of the above, Your Excellency will duly dismiss the allegations of the "Byzantine Academy", whose aim is clearly to exploit cultural matters for political propaganda purposes, and remind this organization that this attitude is not conducive to rapprochement between the two communities in Cyprus.

I would be grateful if the present letter is circulated as a document of the fiftieth session of the General Assembly, under agenda item 55, and of the Security Council.

(Signed) Osman ERTUĞ
Representative
Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus